



LISLE, ILLINOIS

# MORTON ARBORETUM

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## BULLETIN OF POPULAR INFORMATION

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### THE ORNAMENTAL PRUNUS, AN APPRAISAL

The genus *Prunus* which includes the Almonds, Apricots, Cherries, Peaches and Plums constitutes one of the most important subdivisions of the Rose (*Rosaceae*) Family, not only from an economic standpoint but ornamentally as well. And, with the fruit value obvious to all, our interest in this appraisal is largely concerned with the latter point, the group's aesthetic qualifications. Floral effectiveness and ornamental foliage accounts for the popularity of a majority of the species included, with showy fruit, decorative bark, picturesque stature and miscellaneous lesser attractions providing the additional interests.

#### *Trees*

Two very hardy *Prunus* share the distinction of being the first trees in the Arboretum to leaf out in the spring. These are the closely related flaky barked Amur Cherry, (*Prunus Maackii*), from Korea and Manchuria and the hybrid Meyer Chokecherry (*P. Meyeri*) with smooth, darker colored bark. Both are low branched round headed trees (to 45 ft.) whose leaf buds responding to the first sign of warmth sometimes break into leaf in late March or early April. The floral display usually does not come until later in the month, when pendulous racemes of small, very fragrant flowers transform the trees into bouquets of white.

Earliest bloom is produced by the dainty David's Peach, "*dauriana*", slender branched, willow-like small tree from China, which after a mild winter may open its fragile pink blooms before March is over. Another bud tender, but sturdier appearing tree, is the Ansu Apricot (*P. armeniaca ansu*), whose rigid branches are studded with an abundance of round pink buds opening in mid-April into a delightful mass of bluish tinged white blossoms. Less conspicuous, though more dependable as regards regularity of bloom, is the Manchurian Apricot (*P. mandshurica*), small tree with smaller soft pink flowers. With several exceptions the Japanese

Cherries, so widely grown in milder parts of the country for their lovely early blossoms, are unsuited to the rigors of the midwestern climate. Even the hardy Higan-sakura or Spring Cherry of the Japanese, (*P. subhirtella*), is bud tender here, flowering only if the winter has been mild. During a good season, however, this charming "Queen of Cherries" fully lives up to its name, bearing its fringed petaled silvery pink flowers in lavish profusion. The Weeping Higan Cherry (*P. subhirtella pendula*), is even more oriental in appearance, with gracefully drooping branches supporting an equally beautiful mantle of soft pink. Still another variety is noteworthy because of its desirable habit of blooming recurrently in the fall, especially if there has been ample moisture during the summer preceding. Known as the Autumn Higan Cherry (*P. subhirtella autumnalis*), it is a soft pink flowered small tree well worth knowing about. Another true Japanese Cherry, the Yoshino or Tokyo Cherry (*P. yedoensis*), one of the species featured in the plantings around the Tidal Basin in Washington, D.C., has proved fairly reliable at the Arboretum. Opening in late April, its large, clustered single white or pale pinkish flowers are produced in characteristic abundance, climatic conditions permitting. It is a stout branched tree of somewhat spreading habit. The hardiest of the wild Oriental species and one of the tallest is the Sargent Cherry, (*P. Sargentii*), a native of the colder parts of Japan known for its large pink or rose colored flowers appearing in late April before the strikingly colored bronzy red foliage unfolds. Although not as regular a bloomer here as one would wish, its pleasing rounded outline, good foliage and handsome orange red fall coloring more than compensate. Many of the more spectacular double flowered Japanese cherries, which unfortunately have not inherited the type's hardiness, are forms of this species. In more congenial climates the Flowering Peaches (*P. persica* in variety) contribute a display outrivalling the cherries in brilliance and coloring. And, although an occasional established specimen will be encountered in this area, it is the exception rather than the rule.

In considering flowering *Prunus* we must not overlook the Wild Plum (*P. americana*), whose creamy white honey scented flowers are the very essence of spring itself. Occuring in undulating thickets along woodland margins and fencerows, it is an ideal small tree for naturalistic planting, dominating the early May landscape with its foamy blossom and providing a rich harvest of edible red fruit in the fall. The Dunbar Plum (*P. Dunbarii*), an "*americana*" x Bush Plum hybrid, is more noteworthy as a specimen, being an attractively shaped, very floriferous small tree. The European Birdcherries are another spectacular group, later blooming for the most part and with fragrant flowers borne in showy drooping racemes. Of the several recognized varieties in cultivation the Harbinger European Birdcherry (*P. padus commutata*) blooms earliest, often opening its half inch diameter flowers before the first of May. Appearing in such abundance, the tree gives the appearance of a drooping white lilac. Later in the month several other varieties continue the show, the Bigflower European Birdcherry (*P. padus Spaethi*), noted for its





The Japanese Spring Cherry, *Prunus subhirtella*





oversized flowers, and the varieties "*glauca*" and "*pubescens*", whose names are self descriptive. All have good sized foliage of medium green and bear small black fruit. The Pin Cherry (*P. pennsylvanica*), is also May blooming, and although of lower growth does not differ materially in appearance from our native Wild Black Cherry (*P. serotina*). Its double flowered variety (*P. pennsylvanica* fl. pl.), known as the Stockton Cherry, is quite a choice subject, however, with its numerous multipetaled white pompoms. The Arboretum plant came from the Manitoba Hardy Plant Nursery in 1938.

Colored foliage accounts for the popularity of still another group of *Prunus* of which "*cerasifera*" and its several variations are best examples. The well known Pissard Plum (*P. cerasifera atropurpurea*), was the first of the purple leaved plums to be extensively planted, and while still grown, its former popularity is being contested by some of the newer clones such as the pink flowered Black Myrobalan Plum (*P. cerasifera nigra*) with persistent foliage of extremely dark coloring, "*cerasifera rosea*" "Special Selection", whose deep purplish red leaves retain their almost black appearance the season through and the newer variety "Thundercloud". The Blireiana Plum (*P. blireiana*), a double flowered hybrid, is another good dark leaved sort as is its even darker variant, "Othello". In the same botanical classification belongs the Newport Plum, ornamental small tree also well thought of because of its purplish coloring. Showing little if any change in intensity throughout the season it may be depended upon to furnish a lively background for shrubs or perennials of contrasting color. A word, too, about the Tennessee Redleaf Peach (*P. persica* "Tennessee Redleaf"), a small tree with typical peach flowers and conspicuous foliage of deep red.

Decorative highly polished red bark rather than flowers is the featured attraction of the Western Chinese species, *Prunus serrula*, a multiple stemmed small tree (to 30 ft.) until recently found almost exclusively in botanical collections. Now at last available commercially, it should prove one of the most desirable colored barked trees.

### *Shrubs*

None the less valuable as landscape subjects are the shrubby *Prunus*, which like the tree types are plants of diversified interest. It is perhaps not coincidence that the earliest blooming species is also the most widely planted. This is the Nanking or Manchu Cherry (*P. tomentosa*), tall (9 ft.) widespreading bush of Chinese origin which flowers here in mid or late April. Its pink buds open into fragile pinkish flushed white flowers usually borne in crowded profusion along the leafless branches. And in June, before memories of this floral show are forgotten, bright red cherries about half an inch in diameter and of pleasing flavor ripen to attract man and bird alike. Late April or early May brings out two even showier shrubs, the Flowering Plum, or Almond as it is frequently referred to (*P. triloba multiplex*), and the so called Dwarf Flowering

Almond, (*P. glandulosa sinensis*). The former, a bush 10 or 12 feet tall and another popular Chinese ornamental, has but a single season of interest, blossom time, when its every branch is closely set with large double pink flowers an inch or so across. Like a number of other *Prunus* its buds are tender in this area frequently showing the results of severe cold. The true Flowering Almond is more reliable in this respect and can always be counted on for a creditable showing in early May. Its low growth (to 4½ ft.) makes it doubly desirable, in spite of the fact that the individual flowers are smaller and lighter colored. The less common white variety (*P. glandulosa albo plena*), is an excellent blossom companion for the bright colored Japanese Quinces. Although better known for its sizeable bright blue fruit ripening in autumn, the Blackthorn or Sloe (*P. spinosa*), is a tall bush (to 12 ft.) of interesting twiggy growth. It is May blooming, opening its small white flowers before the foliage expands. A light sandy soil is the preference of still another group of shrubby *Prunus*, of value more as sand or soil stabilizers than garden plants. These are all indigenous to the United States and include such species as the Beach Plum (*P. maritima*), of Atlantic coastal areas, the somewhat taller Sand Cherry (*P. pumila*), common on the sands near Lake Michigan, and the geographical variant, the Western Sand Cherry (*P. Besseyi*). All three have a pleasing native picturesqueness evident both in the irregularity of their branch structure and in the homey charm of their creamy flowers. The flavorful fruits are highly regarded for jams and jellies.

Lively reddish bronze foliage distinguishes the Purpleleaf Sand Cherry (*P. cistena*), a handsome eight foot shrub introduced by the South Dakota State Experimental Station sometime before 1910. Although foliage is its chief attraction, there are single white flowers in May and edible purplish black fruit in the fall. Still more spectacular among colored foliage plants is Shubert's Purpleleaf Chokecherry (*P. virginiana*, **Shubert's Purple-leaved**), tall erect branched bush whose bold foliage reverses the usual color sequence among foliage plants by expanding green and gradually turning purple. This unusual Chokecherry originated at the Oscar H. Will Nursery in Bismark, North Dakota.

E. L. Kammerer

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